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1 Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Pp. 236. ISBN: 98-0-230-21810-9

2 Studies in pop culture have the advantage of dealing with material that is more or less familiar to a wide majority of readers and, what is more, appreciated for what it is: the enjoyable—hence surviving and proliferating—collective currency of concepts, facts and views, crude yet effective, by which a culture defines and establishes itself and in which it delves to invest its pleasure principle creatively in never-ending signifying play. As such, books on pop culture which do not base their value on that extraneous charm and the enthusiasm it generates, but endow the familiar with depth and importance granted by an informed perspective are doubly gratifying for the scholar and the social subject alike. One thinks of such examples as Roland Barthes' groundbreaking pop romps in his 1957 Mythologies, some of the essays in Susan Sontag's 1961 Against Interpretation, or Barbara Creed's widely-appreciated 1993 The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis. As Andrew Ross says in his 1989 No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture, it is the scholar that provides pop with prestige, but it's the pop that provides the scholar with both libidinally-charged stimuli for thought and wide recognizability for his finished labor.

3 Bernice Murphy's study can well be added to the above group: it is an addictive page-turner of insightful, solid scholarship on a subject

matter fascinating for its revealed reverberations within the American cultural psyche—it is no coincidence that almost all the novels discussed by Murphy have been turned into major motion pictures and perennial cult hits. The book is also, refreshingly, jargon-free and unpretentious-yet-erudite. The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture is the first, as its writer claims, book on how the American suburb, born of the ashes of WWII and proliferating more or less ever since (or, at least, until the recent Bush recession years), has become an oversignified locus that, on the one hand, epitomizes the attainment of the American Dream for the upwardly-mobile American individualist but, on the other hand, comes to literally house the dark ramifications of that expansive move (westward, upward) that have been termed "American Nightmare": the destruction of the earth and the indigenous First People's culture; the mindless consumerism, homogenization and conformity; the strained or twisted sex/age/class/race-segregated relations resulting from its rigid neighborhood etiquette; and the fear of the Other as mysterious neighbor to the Self. In short: "The most characteristic narrative trope of the Suburban Gothic is, of course the revelation, time and time again, that no matter how picturesque and peaceful a neighborhood, house or family may seem on the surface, dark and usually terrible secrets lie beneath, whether of a psychological, supernatural or familial nature" (200).

4 Murphy astutely locates the problem of Suburbia-Disturbia on the unsettling of the Cartesian parameters that have from the start not only encompassed, but created American identity. For a host of cultural historians and theoreticians, from Sacvan Bercovitch to Jean Baudrillard, America is (self-)conceptualized as the space between the "Westward-ho!" trail of the cowboy and the God-ward rise of the skyscraper, or in the Puritan crossing of the Atlantic (with its typological metaphysical reaching for a new Eden) whose greatest nightmare would become the (Satan-generated) captivity narrative taking place in the hindering and Native-populated woodland. Similarly, Murphy points to the replication of that primal leap into the expansive American nature in the spread of the suburbs, and thus explains the uncanny chill felt by intellectuals criticizing the suburban way of life as due to the same metaphysical concerns with the dangerous encroachment of "civilization" into a wild and inhospitable space, a liminality that can only be feared as toying with the Kristevan abject.

5 Yet, as Murphy wryly observes, it is not a case of "a people of God in the Devil's territory" (to use William Bradford's words from Of Plymouth Plantation), because, in suburbia, the devil is an inside job. The six chapters of her book in fact function upon this common strand, which is the transformation, within the suburban liminal space, of the mundane and the homosocial into the uncanny and the homicidal. Murphy additionally ties this transformation methodologically to the historico-cultural shifts of American in the post-War years, thus providing a (Neo)Historicist panorama of the suburban imagination as well: this

meticulously-researched background, providing a solid theoretical and factual basis for contextualizing suburban gothic, is perhaps one of the book's strongest virtues. The first chapter, "The House Down the Street: The Suburban Gothic in Shirley Jackson and Richard Matheson," focuses on the relation of suburbanites to their locale, the sinister geography of the suburbs expressed in a spatial paradox: the combination of the expansive nature of the suburbs, responsible for eating up the countryside in the 50s and 60s and creating a consumerist craze for the upwardly mobile, with the stasis and paralysis forced upon the suburbanized individuals—the home-bound desperate housewife, the isolated commuting husband, the ossification of conforming to the rules and routine of a closed community. Through the analysis of novels by the two title authors—Jackson being the favorite subject of Murphy's—the research reveals how fears about the insular nature of the suburbs (a new phenomenon in the 1950s) were expressed in images of homeowners neurotically bound to their homes even when attacked by hordes of zombies (I Am Legend), or how neighborhood gossip, rigid social structures and closed doors/minds can ruin the humanity of the denizens, especially the innocent (The Road through the Wall). In chapter 2, Murphy turns upon "Conjure Wife: The Suburban Witch" and pours a lot of tongue-in-cheek commentary on reviewing the paradox of the "new woman" of suburbia, alternatively seen in 1970s gothic tales as an all-powerful witch that can do anything as long as it's for her dear husband's sake (Bewitched), or as a castrating shrew in search of feminist emancipation (Jack's Wife). Chapter 3 reverts back a decade and explores "Aliens, Androids and Zombies: Dehumanisation and the Suburban Gothic" as metaphors for the mindless consumerism and conformity of the American middle class criticized in the 1950s-60s, while its most obviously noted referent, the fear of communists and the Cold War, in fact pushed Americans towards this direction. Murphy's alternative explanation for the fear of the Martian (Br)Other (Invasion of the Body Snatchers) or the zombified neighbor (Night of the Living Dead) is very convincing and in tandem with the motif of the book about the pre-War external threat turning into a—literally—domestic affair. Chapter 4 moves the spatial coordinates of suburban mentality in time, touching upon the problematic relationship of Americans with history, especially that of the indigenous people who owned the land suburbia gobbled up. In "'You Son of a Bitch! You Only Moved the Headstones!' Haunted Suburbia" the abject geographic conflation of building a brand-new house on top of, for example, an old cemetery (Poltergeist), Native sacred ground, or a warlock's altar (The Amityville Horror) stands as a telling allegory for the historical miasma of a nation rooted on a genocide never atoned for, or for the blithe disregard of the American consciousness for history, in an attempt to turn the disadvantage of the newness of the American nation into a boast for its unimpeded "astral" and techno-futuristic direction. This thorny subject is perhaps the only point in the book where research and analysis could have gone deeper, although the author does not neglect the subject or its various manifestation (later on, she also touches

upon “Eurotrashing” when dealing with the subject of the “Old World” vampire, though the touches are precisely that, and go no further into accounting for such bias, 178-79). Spatiality returns in the last two chapters: in “Don’t Go Down to the Basement! Serial Murder, Family Values and the Suburban Horror Film” the author explores the family not as distinct members but as a unit, taking her cue from Poe’s famous gothic conflation of House with Lineage in “The Fall of the House of Usher” as well as Reagan politics in the neurotic 1980s. Here it is the dysfunctional relations between family members, or a grotesque exacerbation of the positives of family dynamic—cohesion, standing up for one another, blood ties and rivalries, heritage and even physical similarity—that provide the gothic occasion. Exploring a wide array of films, from thrillers like Psycho and the Nightmare on Elm Street or Halloween sagas to black comedies like Serial Mom, Murphy shows how the suburban insular cohesion functions as a grotesque metonymy of the family and can lead to disaster when one such member of the “family” goes seriously awry (like being a serial killer). The Disturbia gallery concludes with “‘Ah, But Underneath…’ Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Desperate Housewives,” providing genre balance as well to the book by covering 90s’ contemporary television shows. Continuity with the previous chapter is established also in terms of dealing here with the ruptures within the family unit, the opposite of monstrous cohesiveness. In Buffy it is teenagers versus the world of their parents, ancient vampires and demons and, by extension, their forefathers as a whole: although Murphy does not make a note of it, the eventual destruction of “Sunnydale” because this town and the home of the protagonist’s family (named “Summers”) are situated on top of a portal to Hell, in an arrangement struck between the founding fathers and Satan, alludes ironically to the Puritan origins of the “sunny” American Eden which quickly led to witch trials and looking for the Devil behind every tree and under every snood. As for the exploration of Desperate Housewives, metaphysical element aside, it is the fissures between distinct family members and neighbors within the collective suburban family that are located at the source of every one of the—inordinately many—transgressions, crimes and abominations perpetrated. The absence of the race factor in this part of the book is, however, felt, while the material would have given Murphy much to talk about: in fact her only references to race are in I Am Legend (32-33), while the race and gender of the authors or directors is never raised as an issue. One wonders why. Absent is also any juxtaposition, in terms of race as well as space, of the suburbs to the Latino barrio or the black ghetto or ‘hood, the inner-city neighborhoods, and the idea of the Jewish suburb (like Jersey) versus the WASP suburb is only touched upon once in Chapter 1; but such an extension of the terms of exploration might be asking too much of a single book. It is also understandable that, when dealing with a subject so huge and spawning as popular culture is, some things will be inevitably omitted: one could easily bring into the discussion classic 80s teen horror films such as Fright Night or The Lost Boys, while it’s a pity that the

borderline yet fruitful relation to suburban gothic of Harper Lee's masterpiece To Kill a Mockingbird is completely ignored.

6 It is fitting that the conclusion of the book astutely recognizes the first signs of "The End of Suburbia" in the new, sobering conditions of living brought about by the plummeting of American economy under President Bush Jr.'s disastrous regime. It might also be that the postmodern ethos which, as defined by Fredric Jameson in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," preempts any notions of space and temporality in the (always-already virtual) item, cancels the troubling, abject and liminal dimensions that occasion the suburban gothic. In an age of new practicality and frugality, there is simply no room in the closet for old skeletons.

7 Christina Dokou, The National and Kapodistrian University of Athens